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Article:

Moore, B. (2015) Enforced Diaspora: The Fate of Italian Prisoners of War during the Second World War. *War in History*, 22 (2). 174 - 190. ISSN: 0968-3445

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0968344514521789>

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ENFORCED DIASPORA: THE FATE OF ITALIAN PRISONERS-OF-WAR DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

By the end of the war in Europe in 1945, more than one million Italian servicemen had become prisoners of war and dispersed across Europe, North America, South Africa, India, Asiatic Russia and Australia by their various captors. They had been taken captive in North Africa, Abyssinia and the Italian mainland by the British and Americans, and on the Eastern Front by the Soviet Union. However, their country's surrender and reinvention as an Allied co-belligerent after September 1943 meant that large sections of the Italian armed forces still in the field had the dubious distinction of being interned and then utilised by their erstwhile German allies. There is already an extensive literature on the policies of individual Western captor powers, as well as publications emanating from Italian scholars,¹ but this study is the first attempt to compare these policies as they affected all the Italians taken prisoner of war during the conflict. It seeks to explain how the extensive prisoner diaspora came about and how the fate of these men was dictated primarily by a mixture of economic and security imperatives particular to each of the captor powers involved; imperatives that shifted over time as the war situation itself changed. It also reflects on the relative subordination of political considerations as factors in the prisoners' treatment, both during and after the cessation of hostilities and the sometimes limited efficacy of international conventions and the laws of war in offering them protection.

Italy's entry into the war in June 1940 immediately put her colonial possessions in North and East Africa into the front line. A pre-emptive assault on Egypt by the Italian Tenth Army led by Marshal Rudolfo Graziani in September 1940 soon ground to a halt and a British counterattack led to the complete destruction of more than nine divisions and the capture of approximately 133,000 prisoners.² A similar story was played out in Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland which together yielded a further 64,000 captives in early 1941. So great and so unexpected was the scale of these victories that the officers in charge were initially unable to provide accurate prisoner numbers. However, this overwhelming success brought its own problems for the British Commander-in-Chief, General Wavell. Egypt itself was by no means politically secure and the provision of food, guards, and suitable accommodation for so many enemies so close to a fluid war zone could not be guaranteed. Various imperial territories were asked to help but in the meantime Wavell unilaterally sent a first tranche of 5,000 Italian officers to India. Subsequent formal agreements with the governments of imperial territories meant that more prisoners held in Egypt were soon evacuated by sea via Suez to India, South Africa and Australia while those in East Africa were taken south into Kenya.³ The speed of their evacuation was largely determined by the availability of suitable transport but even in January 1941, London was already pressing for prisoners to be used as labour behind the lines and as substitutes for pioneer companies. In spite of Wavell's

reservations, February 1941 saw the formation of 18 prisoner-of-war labour companies for battlefield salvage work, although the mass mobilisation of European Italians as labour was avoided by the use of Libyans who had been captured serving as Italian colonial troops.⁴

This tension between security concerns on the one hand, and the need to make the prisoners productive on the other was also apparent in the imperial territories that acted as detaining powers. The majority of the captured officers (who could not be required to work under the terms of the Geneva Convention) were sent to India, but both the Union of South Africa and Australia saw the captives as a welcome addition to an overstretched domestic civilian labour market. Thus, for example, 90% of the first 20,000 Italians sent to South Africa were prioritised for employment in road building and agricultural work.⁵ In this respect, the Union had some advantages, being well away from war zones and, with a very small local Italian community, the only real threat from the prisoners came from the possibility of escape or collusion with anti-Allied Afrikaners. Indeed, this provides the explanation for the large numbers of Italians who were ultimately sent there, coupled with the fact that the Union authorities were unwilling to act as hosts for German prisoners evacuated from North Africa in 1942 and 1943 because of the greater potential security threat they presented.⁶

Initial British perceptions that most captured Italians were uncommitted to Fascism and pleased to be out of the war seem to have been borne out; so much so that in spite of security concerns, the import of Italian prisoners to the United Kingdom was being actively discussed early in 1941 to alleviate a grievous shortage of labour on the home front. The first contingents of a planned 25,000 arrived on British soil in July of that year to be held in purpose-built camps. Optimum use of their labour required maximum flexibility and mobility. Accommodating men in camps had only limited value as too much time was taken in moving them to where they were actually needed, and small labour companies were soon being used with minimal guarding. Ultimately, prisoners were billeted on individual farms where their labour could best be utilised. Thus even in a country where security concerns were supposedly paramount, the insatiable demand for labour overrode many considerations, although it should be said that Italians brought to the United Kingdom were more carefully screened for fascist sympathisers than those sent to other parts of the Empire.⁷ However, much the same pattern was evident there too, with reliable prisoners increasingly deployed with few, if any, guards.

In general terms, the British Imperial authorities looked to adhere to the spirit if not the letter of the Geneva Convention at all times, in spite of some difficulties in communication with their counterparts in Rome.⁸ Thus prisoners were generally employed only on work with no direct relation to the war effort – primarily agriculture, forestry and civil construction projects - although there were examples where expediency led to some blurring of distinctions. For example, Italians sent to the United Kingdom were used to help

build some of the defences for the British naval base at Scapa Flow on Orkney while others were drafted in to augment the depleted ranks of non-combatants in the Eighth Army in the Middle East as cooks, mess servants and batmen. As a report in July 1943 made clear,

Bribes and corruption are, of course, unknown in the British Army [but] that the gratitude of a commanding officer to a PW Camp Officer for supplying him with several prisoners might sometimes express itself in a bottle of whiskey or something else is beside the point. And so all units with an enterprising [commanding officer], authorised to hold PW or not, suffered little or nothing from the prevailing and greatly advertised shortage of manpower.⁹

In the United Kingdom, the Italians were extensively employed in agriculture and forestry where unskilled labour was in short supply or completely unavailable. Only a very small number of officers accompanied the men, and these were nearly all protected personnel; medical staff and priests. Elsewhere in the Empire they were put to work on major forestry and road-building projects. In Kenya they were utilised to improve the Great North Road and by September 1943 the colony played host to 58,112 POWs, many of whom latterly found their way into farm work. In South Africa, the Italians could also be found contracted out to farmers although the Union government had to be wary of Trade Union objections to their deployment. Provision was made for up to 100,000 to be held there but the total in September 1943 stood at around 48,320. India ultimately accommodated more than 66,000, including more than 11,000 officers. Australia also found space for 4,592 men but there were other, smaller groups spread across the British Empire, including over 1,000 in Persia and Iraq, 578 in West Africa, 60 in Canada, 31 in Jamaica and a further 30 elsewhere in the Caribbean.¹⁰ All the figures included naval and air force personnel as well as merchant mariners, a factor that may help explain these small numbers in unusual locations away from the main theatres of war.

Table 1: Italian Prisoners of War in the United Kingdom and Dominions, 15 September 1943¹¹

<u>Italians</u>	<u>Officers</u>	<u>Other Ranks</u>	<u>Total</u>
Great Britain	364	76,491	76,855
Middle East	2,723	56,732	59,455
Persia and Iraq	5	1,196	1,201
East Africa	4,938	53,174	58,112
West Africa	1	577	578
India	11,029	55,703	66,732
Australia	473	4,119	4,592
Canada		60	60
South Africa	202	48,118	48,320
Jamaica		31	31
Caribbean	6	24	30
Total	19,741	296,215	315,966

The United States' entry into the war resulted in the immediate seizure and internment of a few Italian prisoners, but it was not until the beginning of 1943, when US forces began the Tunisian campaign, that they made their first large-scale captures. While there had been no preconceived plan to utilise prisoners of war, the need to keep combat troops supplied meant that Italians were soon drafted in to augment existing French and Arab civilian workers. The American military authorities were somewhat wary of using Italians more widely, but the imperative of finding labour overcame any reticence and they could soon be found deployed in warehousing, transportation, road-building and general labouring.¹² Soon afterwards, Italians inside camps were also put to productive work. The conclusion of the war in North Africa led to the surrender of 252,415 German and Italian prisoners, a number so great that London and Washington decided to split the responsibility for them equally through the so called 50:50 Agreement.¹³ Most of the Germans and around 50,000 Italians were shipped to the United States but 15,000 Italians and 5,000 Germans

were also transferred into French hands, again ostensibly as a labour force, but in practice as insurance for any Free French prisoners taken by the Axis who might otherwise have been summarily executed as *francs-tireurs*.¹⁴ This began a policy for both American and British forces where the maximum number of Italians who were 'harmless to operations' would be retained to meet the labour needs associated with the build-up to the attack on Sicily and the Italian peninsula.

This objective was temporarily undermined when, after the fall of Mussolini, Dwight D. Eisenhower made a speech directed at the Italian government which intimated that Italians captured in Tunisia and thereafter would be repatriated if all the Allied prisoners then in Italian hands were safely returned. His words caused some initial panic in British circles because of the importance they attached to the Italians as a labour force, but in the event, neither London nor Washington had to deliver on this undertaking as many Allied prisoners in Italian camps were either handed over to the Germans by their Italian captors or were captured as the forces of the Third Reich flooded into the country from the North.¹⁵ In any case, it transpired that neither the British nor the American military authorities were prepared to give up their captive Italian labour forces even though the speed of the military success on Sicily in July 1943 led to another surfeit of prisoners. This embarrassment of riches led Eisenhower to disarm and parole 61,658 officers and men of Sicilian origin to help with the harvest.¹⁶ Paroling had been initiated on pragmatic grounds to remove the responsibility for feeding and accommodating large numbers of prisoners and it was continued once the invasion of the Italian mainland began – although by this stage there was a presumption that any captives taken before the armistice with the Badoglio regime was agreed would be kept as prisoners-of-war.¹⁷ There is no doubt that both the British and American authorities had identified the value of Italian prisoners as a labour supply at an early stage, both as a substitute for military as well as civilian manpower shortages. The prisoners' relative lack of political commitment to the Mussolini regime and general docility allowed good use to be made of their services as a means of offsetting the costs of their captivity and rendering valuable indirect help to the war effort in Europe, North America and the British Empire.

The confusion over the status of Italians in captivity continued after 8 September 1943. The domestic credibility of the Badoglio regime rested in large part on getting Italy out of the war and getting her soldiers home. While the first had been achieved, albeit at considerable cost with large swathes of Northern and Central Italy occupied by her former Axis partner, the latter remained unattainable in the face of British and American intransigence. The Geneva Convention made no provision for a belligerent changing sides in a conflict, but the British were adamant that, whatever the future status of the prisoners, they should be regarded as a pool which Allied governments would continue to draw on in whatever way would best serve the manpower problem and the wider war effort.¹⁸ After the armistice, attempts were made to negotiate a formal co-belligerency agreement with

Badoglio's government, but without initial success.¹⁹ For political reasons, the Allied powers wanted to provide some recognition to the Badoglio regime – in order to enlist its help in the liberation and governance of Italy. Washington and London thus promoted the idea of co-belligerency as there was no question of the Italians becoming allies overnight, not least because that would involve some form of peace settlement – something that both the major powers were keen to avoid.²⁰ For their part, the Italians were keen to see their soldiers in captivity returned home wherever possible rather than being employed by the Allies to prosecute the war against the Germans. There is no doubt that the government's legitimacy with the Italian people would have been greatly enhanced if they could have shown some tangible benefits for the concessions made.²¹ However, the negotiations ran on into April 1944 when the process reached an *impasse*.²² As Harold Macmillan recorded in his diary for 4 April 1944:

There is nothing more I can do. I am advising London to go right ahead with organising the Italian prisoners into pioneer battalions and to put them on to work which is technically forbidden by the Convention. After all, there is nothing which Badoglio can do, except lodge a protest with the protecting power – Switzerland. I do not believe he will do this, especially as he has already agreed to those in North Africa being employed on such work.²³

This last reference was to a demand from Eisenhower to Badoglio on 9 October 1943, just a month after the armistice, that Italian prisoners in North Africa could be used as non-combatant auxiliaries alongside Allied forces. This had been agreed verbally by the Italians two days later, although there was some considerable, and perhaps understandable, reticence about making the deal public.²⁴

Co-belligerency meant that Italian prisoners prepared to undertake work beyond the terms of the Geneva Convention were offered better pay, conditions and the chance of early repatriation while remaining as prisoners. A good deal of thought was given to civilianising those willing to change status, but this was deemed inadvisable as it would remove the command structure and the possibility of using (non-commissioned) officers as overseers and supervisors. In Britain, Italian Labour Battalions were created and deployed by various government ministries to carry out essential tasks. While this had important ramifications for the use of Italians as substitutes for civilian labour in the United Kingdom and its Empire, it also had an impact on the use of prisoners in the war establishment of British forces. By early 1944, many thousands of prisoners had been incorporated into pioneer units, thus freeing British imperial service manpower for other duties.²⁵ By the end of the war in Europe, 63% of the 154,000 Italians in the United Kingdom had been persuaded to become co-belligerents, although a residual 40,000 or so steadfastly refused to succumb to the blandishments of their captors. While there were undoubtedly fascist elements among the prisoners who refused to co-operate on ideological grounds, many others feared that reprisals would be taken against their families still in northern (German-

occupied) Italy.²⁶ The Americans operated a similar policy of mobilising Italian captives from October 1943 onwards into Italian Service Units (ISU) of 250 men, commanded by Italian officers and NCOs. Although all prisoners had been notionally screened and categorised as secure, doubtful or insecure, this was largely ignored in the rush to use their services and only a few officers were given proper investigation and then relied upon to weed out any unreliable elements among their men. ISUs were subsequently deployed throughout Tunisia and Algeria and undertook all manner of subsidiary roles – in many cases alongside American units.²⁷ Latterly some 28,000 were also employed in supporting the invasion of Southern France, and in the later stages of the campaign on the Italian mainland. It is worth noting that some Italians who had not been taken as prisoners of war were formed into Italian Army Service Units (ITU) and deployed by both the British and the Americans. However, problems were encountered when they worked alongside volunteer POW units and were seen to have better pay and conditions.²⁸

The 50,000 Italians sent to the United States in the spring and summer of 1943 probably enjoyed the best conditions of any experienced by their comrades in captivity.²⁹ Although there was some disappointment when many of the camps in the United States turned out to be in desert states like Texas and Arizona, the overriding memory evoked by their experiences was of the quantity and quality of the food the prisoners habitually received. An Italian wrote of his arrival in Florence, Arizona:

When we arrived they took us to the mess hall to eat. We had pasta, meat, fruit and dessert. It was truly a wonderful dinner. I first thought it had to be some very special occasion, but I soon realized that we were always fed very well.³⁰

Most were employed in agriculture; everything from cotton farming to ranching and forestry. Although initially employed inside camps, the authorities also wanted to use the Italian prisoners more productively, for example in working for private employers as contract labourers. Usually supervised by Italian NCOs, they were required to carry papers to show that they had been paroled for the purpose.³¹ As with the Italians in British captivity, they were offered incentives to join ISUs as non-combatant formations attached to US military establishments, led by Italian officers, and wearing Italian uniforms, insignia and badges. Some rudimentary screening took place, but only 3,000 of the 50,000 were rejected at this stage.³² The incentives offered included better conditions, early repatriation and the possibility of a return to the US without having to wait for an immigration visa. They were also promised that they would not be sent abroad or asked to fight. However, the same reservations were evident among these men as with their counterparts in the United Kingdom. Some saw it as a moral issue about changing sides when the Allies were still fighting Italians in Europe. Others looked at it more pragmatically and were worried about reprisals against their families in German-occupied Italy and also about their status as soldiers when they were finally returned home.³³ Nevertheless, around 32,500 ultimately joined ISUs and spent the remainder of war working alongside US soldiers.³⁴ Only four ISU

units totalling around 1,000 men were sent overseas – to the United Kingdom and then to Normandy to support US troops in NW Europe.³⁵

The final tally of Italians taken captive by the western powers can be seen in the table below, although there may be some elements of double counting when compared with the table above. Nonetheless, the numbers are substantial and the fact that the majority of these prisoners were put to work in some form or another demonstrates their benefit both to the Allied war effort and to some aspects of postwar reconstruction.

Table 2: Italian Statistics for the Total Numbers of Italian POWs in Allied Hands³⁶

Location	British Hands	US Hands	French Hands	Total
Britain	158,029	-	-	158,029
Italy	16,514	20,000	-	36,514
Gibraltar	541	-	-	541
North Africa	26,638	9,751	37,500	73,889
West Africa	1,458	-	-	1,458
South Africa	40,285	-	-	40,285
East Africa	42,857	-	-	42,857
Middle East	58,520	-	-	58,520
Canada	59	-	-	59
Jamaica	29	-	-	29
India	33,302	-	-	33,302
Persia & Iraq	2,000	-	-	2,000
Australia	17,657	-	-	17,657
United States	-	51,500	-	51,500
France	-	43,000	-	43,000
TOTAL	397,916	124,251	37,500	559,667

The Allies had also hoped that a formal declaration of war by the King against Germany in early October 1943 – a decision delayed in the hope that it would follow the liberation of Rome – would lead to some Italian military personnel being deployed in the liberation of their country. In fact, some Italians on the mainland were remobilised from the end of September onwards but they were drawn from soldiers garrisoned in the southern part of the country who were undertrained, ill-equipped, ill-disciplined and had never seen active service. The Allies probably regarded these Italian formations as politically more important than any military effectiveness they might have possessed, and treated them accordingly.³⁷ Later, a First Motorised Combat Group comprising 295 officers and 5,387 other ranks was formed from men who had escaped internment by the Germans and had found their way into Allied occupied territory.³⁸ Its first engagement came at Monte Lungo, where it fought alongside the Americans. Ultimately it grew in strength to around 22,000 when it was renamed the Corpo Italiano di Liberazione (Italian Liberation Corps) and continued to operate alongside Allied soldiers at Monte Cassino and later along the Gothic Line.³⁹ Initial Allied suspicion of their erstwhile enemies was soon replaced by a grudging respect for their abilities as front line troops in the battle to liberate their homeland.

While Italy's transition from Axis power to co-belligerent had largely positive outcomes for the ideologically uncommitted Italians already in British or American captivity, the situation for the Italian forces still deployed against the Allies was problematic in the extreme. The terms of the armistice on 8 September 1943 included the provision that the Italian Navy and merchant fleets should make their way to Allied controlled ports and the Air Force should likewise evacuate to Allied bases. However, this left the Italian Army in the peninsula and in the Balkans with few options – instructed to stop fighting but with no orders as to how to deal with their erstwhile German Allies.⁴⁰ As a result of this precipitous *volte face* on the eve of the Allied assault on the Italian mainland, the bulk of the Italian Army was rendered inoperative – although the Allies had some hopes that the Badoglio regime might order sabotage actions against the Germans. The Allied commanders did not expect to gain much from the surrender beyond the acquisition of the Italian fleet, the use of soldiers in ports and to secure lines of communication.⁴¹ However, there were possible strategic advantages to be had elsewhere. The Dodecanese Islands were largely garrisoned by Italian troops and it was thought that these might be liberated at little cost if the Italians could be persuaded to neutralise the much smaller numbers of Germans there. This hope proved illusory as, in the face of German threats, the Italians showed no inclination to act in spite of their numerical superiority. Assessing that the assault on the Italian mainland was the priority, Eisenhower's command abandoned the islands' liberation and the occupying Germans subsequently interned the Italians garrisoned there.⁴² Elsewhere in the Axis occupied Mediterranean similar tactics were used to secure control, on at least one occasion with devastating consequences.

A force of 11,500 Italians on the island of Kefalonia had been 'reinforced' by 2,000 Germans in July 1943. At the armistice, the Italian commander, General Antonio Gandin, received somewhat vague orders from his superiors to the effect that he should not confront the Germans unless threatened by them and should also not make common cause with the Allies or with the local Greek partisans. All Italian shipping had left the island as part of the armistice agreement, giving him no means of evacuating his soldiers. On 11 September, Gandin was told to resist any German attempts to disarm his men, but at the same time was offered three choices by his German counterpart; continue fighting alongside the Germans, disarm peacefully, or fight. Having decided to disarm, he was faced with widespread opposition from his junior officers and sporadic attacks on German forces led to an escalation of violence between the two sides in the coming days. Faced with no prospect of outside help and total German air superiority, the Italians' resistance lasted for around ten days before they ran out of ammunition. Approximately 1,200 were killed in the fighting but, on orders issued from Berlin on the same day, most of the 340 captured Italian officers including Gandin were summarily executed as traitors and a further communication ordered that no prisoners were to be taken.⁴³ The result was that around 5,000 men already in captivity were also executed, and a further 3,000 survivors died when the transport ships taking them into captivity struck mines in the Adriatic.⁴⁴ This combination of a knee-jerk revenge response by Berlin coupled with intransigent and obedient local German commanders led to this major war crime, but the Italians' usefulness as labour soon reasserted itself. On Corfu, some 600 to 700 were killed in combat or shot.⁴⁵ Those captured Italians were offered the chance to join the Germans, undertake forced labour on the island or be shipped to German concentration camps. Most chose the second option. On other Greek islands, officers were shot in large numbers, and many ordinary soldiers also lost their lives when transported across waters dominated by Allied air and sea power. For example, some 13,000 Italians on the island of Rhodes suffered this fate out of a total strength of around 80,000.⁴⁶ Elsewhere, Italian units had more options, and some in Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece chose to join the partisans rather than surrender to the Germans. Indeed, in Yugoslavia almost two complete divisions defected to create a 'Garibaldi' division that fought uneasily alongside the Yugoslavs until the war's end.⁴⁷

One of the problems for all the Italian commanders on the eve of the armistice was interpreting the instructions from Marshal Badoglio and his government. Efforts by the regime to prepare them for the surrender had only limited effects and a frustrated Eisenhower later commented that 'if the Italian Army had done its utmost, we could have had all of Italy'.⁴⁸ This may have been fanciful as German troops had already been flooding into northern Italy in expectation of trouble. As it was, the Italians were only told to treat their former German allies as enemies on 13 September, some four days after the event.⁴⁹ Thus in both Corsica and Sardinia, the Italians far outnumbered the German garrisons, but most escaped to the mainland.⁵⁰ More to the point, many commanders showed a lack of

enthusiasm for changing sides immediately, not least because few harboured anti-German sentiments, which led one of Eisenhower's aides to describe them as 'jellyfish'.⁵¹

For the approximately 3.7m Italian servicemen who ultimately fell into German hands, the armistice of 8 September was to have potentially serious consequences.⁵² A lack of leadership from the Badoglio regime and high level confusion permeated all levels of the Italian Army in what was now the German area of occupation. Some units reinforced their commitment to the Axis cause and vowed to go on fighting. This included large sections of the Nembo division evacuated from Sardinia and the Folgore Division that had fought at El Alamein.⁵³ Many others chose that moment to demobilise themselves and go home, a process that German decrees served to reinforce.⁵⁴ Some garrisons, such as Turin, were surrendered without a fight by their commanders while others put up only token resistance. This included the substantial forces stationed in the Italian zone of occupied France. Others chose a different course; interpreting Badoglio's broadcast that Italians should 'resist all attacks from whatever quarter they [should] come'. A few places; Milan, Verona and Bolzano, mounted meaningful opposition but their resistance was inevitably uncoordinated and largely doomed to failure – with the result that those captured were severely treated by the Nazis.⁵⁵ The perpetrators were seen as having betrayed the Axis cause in its hour of need against Bolshevism by forcing the diversion of much-needed forces away from the Eastern Front. Within a week, the fifty-six divisions of the Italian Army had effectively ceased to exist. In the North, many soldiers had demobilised themselves, others had chosen to fight on for the Axis, or had thrown in their lot with the newly created Salò Republic. Their choices were often dictated by a mixture of personal ideology, circumstances, location and situation.

Berlin's response to the Italian collapse was brutal, but also pragmatic, choosing to remove the rebellious Italians to Germany to work in industry and agriculture in order to help meet the insatiable demand for labour inside the Reich. Ultimately, this included over 600,000 former Italian servicemen who were used as forced labourers under the command of the OKW. Their numbers seemed to have reached a peak in February 1944 when 607,331 were reported in this category with 454,131 employed inside the Reich, a further 33,665 in the General Government of Poland and another 41,320 in the occupied territories.⁵⁶ Numbers fluctuated as more Italians were brought under OKW control and some were then released to help form the armed forces of the Salò Republic. The German authorities had planned to spread this new source of labour across a range of employments within the Reich. A report for the fourth quarter of 1943 envisaged the distribution of Italians as follows:

Table 3: Employment of Italian Military Internees in the German War Economy

	Planned Autumn 1943	Actual 15 February 1944
Heavy Industry	30,000	35,082
Other War Industries	150,000	198,932
Coal Mining	115,000)) 38,458
Other Mining	5,000)
Food Production	60,000	34,666
Transshipment	11,000	-
Railways	15,000	39,891
Postal Services	10,000	3,861
Building Industries	25,000	57,712
Wehrmacht Transport	-	8,863
Zivile Bedarfsträger	-	8,143
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Total	421,000 ⁵⁷	428,834 ⁵⁸

This would have the effect of bolstering labour supply at home and freeing up more Germans for service on the Eastern Front, although some Italians also volunteered for service in this way. While this plan of distribution did not fall easily into place, (as the actual figure for early 1944 show), it does give an indication of how widely and extensively the Italians were used in the German war economy. Indeed, as the war reached its final phases, these same labourers were increasingly used to clear up the immense damage done to major German cities by Allied bombing raids.

Although the designation as a military internee supposedly conveyed some privileges, these did not really materialise for the Italians employed in the Reich. They were regarded as traitors to the cause by the German authorities and civilians who supervised them and branded as ‘Badoglio-Schweine’, an image that was reinforced by the idea that Italy had betrayed Germany twice – in 1915 as well as in 1943.⁵⁹ Poor working conditions and ill treatment led to higher levels of mortality than for other comparable workers. There was a tension between the need to feed the workers sufficiently to maximise their productivity, and a desire to punish them for their betrayal. In general, workers from Western Europe had received better treatment than their Eastern European counterparts and officially, the Italians were to be treated along the same lines as Western European prisoners-of-war. In practice, even the rations given to the latter did not meet the basic provisions of the Geneva Convention but were augmented by the provision of Red Cross parcels – something denied to the Italians as well as to the Russian prisoners and ‘*Ostarbeiter*’.⁶⁰ Moreover, it was clear that they had few friends among the other prisoners in the camps where they were held. As both newcomers and former enemies, they were

usually given short-shrift by the British, French and Soviet prisoners they encountered. A separate Servizio Assistenza Internati was created to meet the needs of the Italians and it planned to send 250 railway wagons of food a month to the camps in the Reich. In the event, it was able to deliver only 25% of this amount in the third quarter of 1944, and conditions worsened thereafter.⁶¹ A hierarchy was established in a Führer directive of 28 February 1944, the so-called *Leistungsernährungslass*, which stipulated the amounts of food to be allocated to the various groups of non-German labour then being used by the German war economy.⁶² While Hitler and leading Nazis had some enduring respect for Mussolini and for Italian fascism, and thus tried to limit the responsibility to a 'Badoglio clique', this seems to have had little practical effect.⁶³ Some Italians were later civilianised which again theoretically altered their status and their treatment, but by this stage, conditions inside Germany had deteriorated so much that it made little difference to their objective circumstances.

Less well-documented is the fate of the Italians taken prisoner on the Eastern Front by the Red Army and even precise numbers are difficult to establish.⁶⁴ Moscow made the decision to send its Italian prisoners home on 25 August 1945. There had been attempts to indoctrinate and propagandise some of them in camps during the conflict, with a view to using them to help promote Soviet style communism in postwar Italy. However, this became somewhat redundant after the Potsdam Conference and the Japanese surrender when Stalin effectively gave up exercising influence in Italy in exchange for a free hand in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. By November 1946, when some 10,032 men from the Italian Army in Russia had been returned, the Soviets declared the process complete – leaving around 60,000 others assumed to have been taken prisoner unaccounted for.⁶⁵ They became a major political cause in postwar Italy as families pressed for information about those still missing.⁶⁶ Only in the 1990s did evidence emerge of some 64,500 Italians who had been captured alive by the Red Army. Some 38,000 had reportedly died in camps - amounting to 56.5% of the total - a colossal proportion when compared to the 14% of Germans, 10.6% of Hungarians and 29% of Rumanians who suffered a similar fate. The Soviets had actually repatriated around 21,800 soldiers, but this included in Italians 'liberated' from German captivity during the Red Army's westward advance who were also sent to camps and treated as though they were prisoners of war.⁶⁷ Such was the fate of Air Force General Alberto Briganti. Interned by the Germans after September 1943, he was shipped to Poland where he was held in a camp some 30 kilometres from Posen. When the camp was overrun by the Red Army, he and other Italian officers were shipped to a small town near Kharkov. In September 1945, he was included among 1,700 generals, officials, soldiers and civilians who must have been some of the first to be repatriated when they were taken by train on a circuitous route back to Italy.⁶⁸

The reasons for the abnormal mortality rate of the Italians – abnormal even in the extreme circumstances of the Eastern Front - can be explained by reference to the time of

their capture. By the summer of 1942, the Italian VIII Army numbered some 229,000 men and was deployed along the Don Front.⁶⁹ In December, a Red Army offensive broke the adjacent Rumanian III Army and the Italians were forced to retreat some 300 miles on foot with no supplies and in temperatures sometimes below -30°C.⁷⁰ Most Italians therefore fell into Soviet hands at the end of 1942 and the beginning of 1943, when the Red Army was already swamped with prisoners after its successes at Stalingrad and its resources were stretched to the limit.⁷¹ The majority seem to have died in the early part of 1943; their clothing and equipment having failed to protect them from the Russian winter and thousands succumbed to cold, hunger, typhus and other diseases connected to malnutrition.⁷² In March 1943, The Italian representative in the Comintern, Vincenzo Bianco appealed directly to General Petrov as head of GUPVI, the administration of POW camps, in an attempt to save those that remained alive.⁷³ He stressed their potential as converts and many Italians volunteered for political indoctrination on the grounds that conditions in these camps were appreciably better than ordinary camps. Given the apparent lack of resilience shown by the Italians in Russian captivity, they were ostensibly never seen as a major contribution to the Soviet labour force. In postwar Italy, their fate became part of a feud between the Communist Party on the one hand and the Army General Staff on the other where the former tried to blame the wartime generals (some of whom were still in post) for the defeat and the apparently catastrophic loss of life, while the General Staff countered by accusing the Soviet Union of responsibility.⁷⁴

Although the Italian national narrative has tended to highlight the victimisation of its soldiers interned by the Germans and forced to work for the Reich over the incarceration of other Italians by the Allies and the Soviet Union, their circumstances and mortality rates were not that different from other groups who were similarly employed – in spite of the disadvantages they suffered. Italian authors have suggested that 30,000-60,000 died as a result of their internment, but more objective surveys have discovered only 19,714 deaths among the whole group – attributable to disease, industrial injuries, ill-health and bombing. This suggests that the real total may be in the region of 20-25,000, or around 3.5% of the total.⁷⁵ This would put it more in line with the losses suffered by other Western prisoners of war, but nowhere near the much higher levels of mortality suffered by Russians and other Eastern European nationalities.

This last point is worthy of some further reflection. At the end of hostilities, Italy remained firmly in the Western camp, with Stalin having effectively given up any ambitions in the peninsula. The nascent Italian Republic had to establish an acceptable narrative for its existence within the western orbit. This involved talking up the resistance to Fascism (although only to an extent in order to avoid allowing communism too great a role) but also meant that the fate of the Italian prisoners in the hands of the western powers was essentially marginalised as something of an embarrassment. In contrast, the relatively small numbers of Italians in Soviet hands could be seen as fitting into a Cold War agenda,

especially as their fate was uncertain and many had not been returned at the end of hostilities. However, the political prominence of the Italian Communist Party in the postwar era prevented them from becoming too much of a political weapon, whereas the Italian forces seized by the Germans could be seen as reinforcing the country's victimisation at the hands of the Nazis while at the same time underplaying the country's role as an Axis ally.⁷⁶

The dispersal of Italian prisoners across five continents was undoubtedly determined initially by security issues, but also came to be driven by a realisation in the corridors of power in all belligerent states that the huge numbers of men involved could be put to good use in substituting for manpower that might be better employed in uniform. This dictated that Italians were sent to many parts of the British Empire, including the imperial motherland, where they were put to work in agriculture, but increasing also in industrial and service sector employment. Elsewhere, their use was largely in agriculture, road-building and forestry, as was the case for men shipped to the United States. The fate of the Italian military internees in German hands and their dispersal across the German Reich and some occupied territories is also worthy of note. Here the Germans had no compunction about forcibly demobilising them and thus removing any protection afforded by the Geneva Convention, so that they could then be used for any form of work their captors deemed necessary. They certainly represented a means of freeing up German labour for the armed forces who were suffering ever more grievous losses as the war entered its final phases. Indeed, for the prisoners who survived initial capture and captivity, it was the changing fortunes of war that dictated their experiences. While those in Western Allied hands were subject to ever more relaxed and liberal treatment by their captors, exactly the reverse was true for the Italians in German hands whose lot was dictated not only by their portrayal as traitors, but also by the increasing economic and social deterioration during the death-throes of the Third Reich.

Ultimately, the Italians in German hands were liberated either by the Red Army or by Eisenhower's forces as the war came to an end. As we have seen, the Soviet Union began its repatriation of enemy Italian prisoners almost as soon as hostilities ended – as did their American allies. For both powers, the process was largely concluded by the second half of 1946. Only the prisoners held within the British Empire had to wait longer to be returned home. Problems of finding suitable shipping were cited as a reason for the delay, but in reality, the Italians were far too useful as a labour supply to be released quickly, and the final repatriations did not take place until well into 1947. In this last case, the postwar fate of these prisoners continued to be determined by economic imperatives, something that had also governed the conditions and treatment of their fellow servicemen in the hands of other belligerents. Thus in most cases, political and even security considerations played only a subordinate role in their captivity and the timing of their eventual repatriation.

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- ¹ See especially Louis E. Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War in America 1942-1946* (Westport:CT: Praeger, 1992). Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, *The British Empire and its Italian Prisoners of War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003). Flavio Giovanni Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986). Maria Teresa Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003). Gerhard Schreiber, *Die italienischer Militärinternierten im deutschen Machtbereich 1943 bis 1945 Verraten-Verachtet-Vergessen* (München: R.Oldenbourg, 1990), p.311. Gabriele Hammermann, *Zwangsarbeit für den "Verbundeten". Die Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen der italienischen Militärinternierten in Deutschland 1943-1945* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2002) and Philip Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini: Italy, the Italians and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Chapter 5.
- ² Moore and Fedorowich, *The British Empire*, p.19.
- ³ War diaries contained in The National Archives, London (TNA) WO169/6759 and WO169/2547-9.
- ⁴ Note to Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Haining, February 1941, TNA WO193/352.
- ⁵ Moore and Fedorowich, *The British Empire*, p.54.
- ⁶ Bob Moore, 'Unwanted Guests in Troubled Times: German Prisoners of War in the Union of South Africa, 1942-43' *Journal of Military History* LX (2006) pp.63-90
- ⁷ For a recent survey of the Italian prisoners in Britain, see, Isabella Insolvabile, *Wops. I prigionieri italiani in Gran Bretagna (1941-1946)* (Napoli/Roma: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2012)
- ⁸ Sir Harold Satow and Mrs M.J.Sée, *The Work of the Prisoners of War Department during the Second World War* (London: Foreign Office, 1950), p.75. 'Report on Special Agreements with Germany and Italy on Geneva Convention and Sick and Wounded Convention' (draft), initially by Satow on 16 December 1942, TNA FO916/86. The exception to this general adherence came in the methods used to extract battlefield and general intelligence from prisoners. See, for example, F.H.Hinsley and C.A.G.Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War Volume Four, Security and Counter-intelligence* (London: HMSO, 1990). Sophie Jackson, *British Interrogation Techniques in the Second World War* (Stroud: History Press, 2012).
- ⁹ Moore and Fedorowich, *The British Empire*, pp.132-3. 'Italian Co-operators and GHQ 2nd Echelon in the Mediterranean Theatres, July 1943, TNA CAB 106/452.
- ¹⁰ War Office Directorate of Prisoners of War (DPW). Return of Enemy Prisoners detained in the United Kingdom and the Dominions as of 15 September 1943, TNA FO898/323.
- ¹¹ Idem.
- ¹² George G. Lewis and John Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization by the United States Army, 1776-1945* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2002) p.177.
- ¹³ Lewis and Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War*, p.177. Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War*, p.xv.
- ¹⁴ Lewis and Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, p.177.
- ¹⁵ Bob Moore, 'The Importance of Labor: the Western Allies and their Italian Prisoners of War in World War II' *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento* XXVIII (2002), p.542.
- ¹⁶ Lewis and Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, p.178. The officers involved were all protected personnel – primarily doctors and chaplains. Moore, 'The Importance of Labor', p.541.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, Foreign Office to Washington reporting Churchill to Roosevelt, 26 July 1943, TNA FO954/13.
- ¹⁸ Eden to Sir Ronald Campbell (Washington), 26 September 1943, TNA CAB122/670.
- ¹⁹ Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani*, p.59.
- ²⁰ Norman Kogan, *Italy and the Allies* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1982), p.43.
- ²¹ Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani*, p.64.
- ²² Kent Fedorowich and Bob Moore, 'Co-Belligerency and Prisoners of War: Britain and Italy, 1943-1945' *International History Review*, XVIII/1 (1996), pp.28-47. Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War*, pp.xvi, 74.
- ²³ Harold Macmillan, *War Diaries: The Mediterranean 1943-5* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp.405-6.
- ²⁴ Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani*, pp.65-6.
- ²⁵ Moore and Fedorowich, *The British Empire*, p.262, footnote 135.

²⁶ Moore and Fedorowich, *The British Empire*, p.151. This was in part created by British policy in recruiting POWs to work in the UK who were from northern Italy – on the grounds that there could be no pressure to repatriate them while the Germans were still in control.

²⁷ Lewis and Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, pp.182-3.

²⁸ Lewis and Mewha, *History of Prisoner of War Utilization*, p.189.

²⁹ Disposal of Prisoners of War Captured in North-West Europe, 10 February 1945, Annex B, TNA CAB 66/61 WP(45)89. 45,000 were nominally British captives and the other 5,000 US.

³⁰ Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War*, pp.41, 44.

³¹ Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War*, p.50.

³² Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War*, p.63.

³³ Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War*, p.77.

³⁴ Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War*, pp.79-81.

³⁵ Carlo Felici, 'I prigionieri italiani nella seconda guerra mondiale' *Revista Militare* (1988) Pt.1, p.136

³⁶ Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War*, pp.99-101.

³⁷ Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani*, p.62 cites ACS PCM 1944-47 fasc. 131, Min Guerra 'Prospetto della situazione dei prigionieri italiani dall'armistizio', 28 July 1946.

³⁸ James Holland, *Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War 1944-1945* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), pp.53-5.

³⁹ Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani*, p.54. Kogan, *Italy*, p.40 suggests that seven Italian divisions fell into Allied hands at the armistice, albeit 'ill-equipped and demoralised'.

⁴⁰ Holland, *Italy's Sorrow*, pp.53, 59. Francesco Fatutta, 'L'esercito nella Guerra di Liberazione (1943-1945)' *Rivista Italiana Difesa* VIII (2002) pp.82-94.

⁴¹ Harry C. Butcher, *Three Years with Eisenhower* (London: Heinemann, 1946), p.335. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (London: Heinemann, 1948), p.205. Richard Lamb, *War in Italy 1943-1945 A Brutal Story* (London: Penguin, 1995) p.176 records that orders to resist the Germans had been drawn up by the Italian War Office, but were not sent to commanders in the field.

⁴² Butcher, *Three Years*, p.359.

⁴³ Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, pp.210-211. Richard Lamb, *Churchill as War Leader: Right or Wrong* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), pp.238-9. 242.

⁴⁴ Rüdiger Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik des Deutschen Reiches 1939 bis 1945' in: *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg* Band 9/II (München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2005), p. 827.

⁴⁵ Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, p.111.

⁴⁶ Elena Agarossi, *A Nation Collapses. The Italian Surrender of September 1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.115.

⁴⁷ Agarossi, *A Nation Collapses*, p.115.

⁴⁸ Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p.828.

⁴⁹ Agarossi, *A Nation Collapses*, p.115. These were the Venezia division and Taurinense alpine division.

See also, Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, p.110.

⁵⁰ Kogan, *Italy*, p.40.

⁵¹ Kogan, *Italy*, p.42.

⁵² Agarossi, *A Nation Collapses*, pp.109-111. Lamb, *War in Italy*, pp.178-9

⁵³ Butcher, *Three Years*, pp.367-8.

⁵⁴ Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p.826.

⁵⁵ Holland, *Italy's Sorrow*, pp.60-1.

⁵⁶ Holland, *Italy's Sorrow*, p.56.

⁵⁷ Lamb, *War in Italy*, p.177.

⁵⁸ Schreiber, *Die italienischer Militärinternierten*, p.311.

⁵⁹ Schreiber, *Die italienischer Militärinternierten*, p.348.

⁶⁰ Hammermann, *Zwangsarbeit für den "Verbundeten"*, p.157.

⁶¹ Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p.831.

⁶² Hammermann, *Zwangsarbeit für den "Verbundeten"*, pp.209-211.

⁶³ Hammermann, *Zwangsarbeit für den "Verbundeten"*, pp.211-212.

Hammermann, *Zwangsarbeit für den "Verbundeten"*, pp.234-5.

Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', pp.837-8.

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- ⁶⁴ See, Maria Teresa Giusti, 'Anti-fascist Propaganda among Italian Prisoners of War in the USSR, 1941-6' in: Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad (eds.) *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace* (Oxford: Berg, 2005). Maria Teresa Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003) and Carlo Vicentini and Paolo Resta, *Rapporto sui prigionieri di Guerra italiani in Russia* (Milan: UNIRR, 2005).
- ⁶⁵ Elena Agarossi and Victor Zaslavsky, *Stalin and Togliatti: Italy and the Origins of the Cold War* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp.159-160.
- ⁶⁶ Giusti, 'Anti-fascist Propaganda', p.77.
- ⁶⁷ Giusti, 'Anti-fascist Propaganda', p.80. Carlo Felici, 'I prigionieri italiani', p.135 and Agarossi and Zaslavsky, *Stalin and Togliatti*, p.160, give different but slightly more precise figures for the numbers repatriated.
- ⁶⁸ Luigi Pignatelli, *Il secondo regno. I prigionieri italiani nell'ultimo conflitto* (Milan: Loganesi, 1969), pp.129-154.
- ⁶⁹ Agarossi and Zaslavsky, *Stalin and Togliatti*, p.159.
- ⁷⁰ Benzo Biasion, Mario Tobino, Mario Rigoni Stern, *The Lost Legions* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), p.307.
- ⁷¹ Agarossi and Zaslavsky, *Stalin and Togliatti*, p.163.
- ⁷² Giusti, 'Anti-fascist Propaganda', pp.80-1.
- ⁷³ Agarossi and Zaslavsky, *Stalin and Togliatti*, p.168-9.
- ⁷⁴ Agarossi and Zaslavsky, *Stalin and Togliatti*, p.162. Giusti, 'Anti-fascist Propaganda', pp.81-2, 88.
- ⁷⁵ Hammermann, *Zwangsarbeit für den "Verbundeten"*, p.584.
- ⁷⁶ Agarossi and Zaslavsky, *Stalin and Togliatti*, pp.172-183 has an extensive discussion of the embarrassment caused to the PCI by the return of prisoners from the Soviet Union who could comment directly on their treatment by the NKVD and GuPVI. There is an extensive debate on Italy's 'memory' of the Second World War. See for example; R.J.Bosworth, 'The Second World Wars and their clouded memories', *History Australia*, VIII/3 (2011); Bosworth, 'Benito Mussolini: bad guy on the international block?' *Contemporary European History*, XVIII/1 (2009); Bosworth, 'A country split in two? Contemporary Italy and its usable pasts', *History Compass*, IV/5, (October 2006), pp.1089-1101, and most recently Rosario Forlenza, 'Sacrificial Memory and Political Legitimacy in Postwar Italy: Reliving and Remembering World War II', *History and Memory*, XXIV/2 (2012), pp.73-116.